**Chapter 3: Summoning the Monks for Counsel**

January 17, May 16, September 17

*Accordingly in every instance, all are to follow the teaching of the rule, and no one shall rashly deviate from it. In the monastery, no one is to follow their own heart’s desire, nor shall anyone presume to contend with the abbot defiantly, or outside the monastery. Should anyone presume to do so, let them be subjected to the discipline of the rule. Moreover, abbot must themselves fear God and keep the rule in everything they do; they can be sure beyond any doubt that they will have to give an account of all their judgements to God, the most just of judges.*

*If less important business of the monastery is to be transacted, the abbot shall take counsel with the seniors only, as it is written: ‘Do everything with counsel and you will not be sorry afterward’ (Sir 32:24).*

In our tradition the heart is the centre of consciousness. It is that aspect of consciousness where who we most deeply are, and who God is, are revealed in experience. So, what could be wrong with following the heart’s desires?

The heart can also be experienced as a murky place of mixed motivation and shadow. The divine-human spiritual reality at the heart of us can get covered and be lost. The ebb and flow of emotions, of feeling, of thoughts, memories, and imagination – all of this can be a challenge as we attempt discernment and decision. Who are we following? Fear, love? Are we aware enough of what is in us, shaping our decisions?

Here, Benedict asks that we follow not the desire of our *own* heart, that is, not to decide in isolation, away from this process of community decision making. The community process can be a check, a balance to our own heart’s murkiness. What we learn about ourselves as we engage the communal decision process can teach us humility. Sometimes we are not the experts of our own lives.

Perhaps there is a difference between desire and longing. What we think of as the heart’s desire may be the wants of the ego. These wants, desires, are impatient. They can be impetuous. Something about them wants gratification as soon as possible. Maybe I don’t want my ignorance exposed; maybe I’m too attached to me being the expert; maybe I’ve got ‘better things’ to do with my time; perhaps I’m avoiding a personality clash – whatever the motivations behind deciding, perhaps rashly, on my own (even if I am in the same room as everyone else), these can swirl in us and claim us. We then follow them.

Longing is of the heart. Longing is patient and faithful. As the heart clears, that is, as what makes the heart murky is healed and changed, we find it easier to live with longing as part of the human condition. The ego, over time, reduces its grasping. Community becomes more a place to be and to long: to belong.

Faith here is the trust to turn even from a focus on our longings (least they become desires). We do this with the eternal hope that these longings will be addressed as we live into our lives. Ultimately, they are fulfilled in God and in union with God.

In this context of desire and longing, loving is the practice of moving beyond desire. And as we do this the ways we can love are revealed to us as we love.

Meditation and community, as acts of love, are both about the clearing, the purifying of the heart, the moving beyond desire. In meditation we do this as we give, give, and re-give our attention to the mantra. In community we do this as we give, give, and re-give our attention to others and the broader day-to-day communal life. The genius of a meditating community is that meditation is a part of this day-to-day communal life. In this community we discover that who we really are and who God is are fundamentally other-centred. Mature loving does not fixate; it is attention turned outwards with desire transcended[[1]](#footnote-1). This takes time.

Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on the things of the flesh; those who live according to the Spirit have their minds set on spiritual things[[2]](#footnote-2). And the outlook of the flesh is death, whereas the outlook of the Spirit is life and peace, because the outlook of the flesh is hostile to God, because it is not and cannot be subject to God's Law, and those who live by the flesh cannot be pleasing to God. You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. (Romans 8:5-9a, RNJB)

1. St. Benedict realised that purity of heart meant the capacity to turn wholly and utterly to the other. He realised with complete clarity that this in turn meant a turning away from self and he saw that turning from self meant the transcending of all desire. (John Main, Community of Love, 142) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ‘Flesh’ can be translated as ‘natural inclinations’, ‘human desires’, or ‘disordered human nature’ (see NJB). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)